REFERENDUM IN THE SOVIET UNION

A Compendium of Reports on the March 17, 1991 Referendum on the Future of the U.S.S.R.

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FORWARD

Mikhail Gorbachev's March 17, 1991 referendum on maintaining the USSR as a "renewed federation" was the first in Soviet, or Russian, history. As the following report makes clear, the referendum was not merely an exercise in public opinion polling or a guide to policymakers. It was intended to give Gorbachev a popular mandate for pressuring the newly elected legislatures of the Baltic States and Soviet republics seeking independence or greater sovereignty. In this light, the referendum amounted to an attempt to use democratic methods to undermine the results of democracy.

Its other purposes aside, however, Gorbachev's referendum does represent an aspect of the democratization of Soviet politics that has taken place since 1985. The Helsinki Commission has carefully tracked this process through public hearings and extensive staff reports on perestroika and on the Baltic States. In 1990, in accordance with its mandate to monitor and promote compliance with the provisions of the Helsinki Final Act and subsequent CSCE documents, the Commission sent staffers to observe parliamentary elections in the Baltic States and the Soviet republics. A compendium of their reports was published in December 1990. This year, Commission staffers monitored the March 3 "counter-referendums" on independence held in Latvia and Estonia, at the invitation of their parliaments and governments. The Commission also sent staffers to observe the conduct of the voting on March 17 in Latvia, Russia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan, and on March 31 observed Georgia's plebiscite on independence. The following report reflects their on-site observations, supplemented by subsequent published reportage about the referendum, and contains as well an analysis of the referendum's implications.

In retrospect, perhaps the most striking thing about the referendum is how little notice the Soviet and international media now pay to an event depicted as "historic." To some extent, the fast pace of change in Soviet politics precludes lingering on last month's news. But the lack of attention also reflects the referendum's minimal impact: as a stategem, it was flawed; as policy, it was irrelevant, since the jurisdictional disputes in the USSR between center and republics had already gone too far for mere strategems to be effective. In fact, the failure of the March referendum to deliver what its initiators sought was its greatest contribution to Soviet politics, since it helped produce the "April Pact" between Gorbachev and leaders of nine republics. That agreement, if followed through sincerely, promises to be a watershed in the decentralization and democratization of the Soviet Union, and may prove genuinely "historic."

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SUMMARY

- Mikhail Gorbachev portrayed the March 17, 1991 referendum on maintaining a unified socialist state as an outgrowth of perestroika's democratization. In fact, his appeal to the population aimed at undercutting independence drives in the Baltic States and elsewhere, as well as republic legislatures that refused to sign his Union Treaty. The Soviet Communist Party and government used all their assets, especially control of the media, to stump for a high turnout and a Yes vote to the Union.

- Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Georgia, Armenia and Moldova boycotted the vote, the first four holding their own plebiscites on independence. The Soviet government countered by aiding local forces to organize balloting. Other Soviet republics added questions or changed Gorbachev's wording to reflect their striving for sovereignty. Only Belorussia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan held the referendum as Gorbachev wanted it.

- Soviet sources claimed an 80 percent turnout, with 76 percent of participants affirming Gorbachev's Union. But about the same percentage of voters in Russia responded to Boris Yeltsin's call for a popularly elected Russian president. Ukraine's results revealed more backing for a Ukrainian sovereignty declaration basically envisioning a future confederation than for Gorbachev's "renewed federation."

- With all sides claiming victory, the result was plebiscitory paralysis and standoff. Having sought a popular mandate for his vision of reform, Gorbachev gained little and now faces a strengthened rival in Boris Yeltsin, likely to become Russia's first elected president in June. Other republics will also probably introduce presidential systems.

- The latest version of the Union Treaty, presented to voters as the architectural plan of the renewed Union they should support, made concessions to republics, especially in the field of foreign policy, but preserved a centralist state and left unclear key procedures of conflict mediation. Republic leaders insisted on greater control of their resources--which was precisely the state of affairs before the hoopla and panic-mongering surrounding the referendum.

- The referendum--the focus of Soviet politics for three months--left few traces and barely affected the dynamics of center-republic relations. If anything, it showed that absent the use of force by the center, republics can counter virtually any tactical ploy it devises.

- Gorbachev's efforts to control the process of reform and to stem centrifugal tendencies began with legislation. That having failed, he tried cooptation through a Union Treaty, occasionally resorting to coercion. His March 17 referendum signalled an attempt to solve his problems with the republics through manipulation. Its failure could now bring about real negotiation.

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I. THE ORIGIN AND POLITICS OF THE REFERENDUM

Introduction

Compared to the situation in the USSR before 1985, a centrally organized referendum in 1991 seeking the "advice and consent" of Soviet citizens on the most basic questions facing their country would seem the very essence of popular sovereignty. In fact, the March 17 referendum--the first in Soviet or Russian history--had an ambiguous relationship to democracy. Its primary purpose was to give Mikhail Gorbachev a popular mandate for getting around inconvenient results of electoral democracy in the republics.

The referendum became the focal point of Soviet politics in December 1990, when Gorbachev proposed the measure to the fourth Congress of People's Deputies.[1] He had previously suggested a referendum on his May 1990 transition program to a "regulated market economy." Gorbachev in October urged another countrywide referendum on legalizing private property, and he repeated this call in his December 1990 speech.[2]

But the referendum that finally took place did not address economic matters. It purportedly concerned, in the words of *Izvestiya* commentator Stanislav Kondrashov, "no more and no less than the very existence of the state." More conservative Soviet commentators remarked on that fact bitterly: articles in *Sovietskaya Rossiya* noted that a country that had suffered neither wartime defeats nor debilitating natural disasters had nevertheless declined to the point of voting on whether to continue as a state.[3]

For Gorbachev, the referendum was essentially a desperate attempt to maintain the Soviet Union's territorial integrity and, most important, central control. The Baltic States' declarations of independence, the sovereignty declarations by newly elected republic legislatures in 1990, the rise of Boris Yeltsin as Russian nationalist leader, economic collapse and disintegration, and ever-intensifying fissiparous pressures drove Gorbachev to seek a new glue to hold the Union together. He staked his hopes on a reworked Union Treaty, to replace the 1922 document that had brought the USSR formally into being.

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[1] "I submit for examination by the congress the proposal that a referendum be held throughout the country, so that each citizen can express himself for or against a union of sovereign states based on the federal principle." *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, Soviet Union, Daily Report (henceforth FBIS DR), Supplement, January 7, 1991, p. 5.

[2] Article 5 of the USSR Constitution envisions submitting "important questions of state life" to a referendum. Interest in referendums had surfaced at the June 1988 19th CPSU Conference but no law on referendums was passed until December 1990. See Sergey Voronitsyn, "The Strange Fate of the Law on Referendums," *Radio Liberty Research*, October 19, 1988.

[3] Gorbachev saw it differently in a February 6 television address: "The forthcoming referendum is the first one in our country and this in itself is an immense achievement of perestroika." FBIS DR February 7, 1991, p. 23.

But for republics breathing the heady oxygen of sovereignty, the November 1990 draft Gorbachev offered seemed unacceptably restrictive and centralist. All of them, including the usually cooperative Central Asian republics and Azerbaijan (still seething after the January 1990 Soviet military action in Baku), demanded major amendments. These modifications would have given the republics much more freedom of maneuver and control of their affairs, particularly their natural resources.

Gorbachev apparently was unwilling to make the sorts of concessions the republics wanted. Instead, he contrived to undercut their authority by appealing to the population at large through a referendum. This resort to "democracy as tactic" had by now become a signature tune in Gorbachev's political repertoire. His 1987 campaign for multi-candidate elections to Communist Party posts was aimed at apparatchiks who opposed or impeded perestroika, as his late 1988 program to elect a new countrywide Supreme Soviet targeted the CPSU, which, as an institution, had proved an obstacle to economic and political reform. These strategems worked even better than intended, however: by July 1989, Gorbachev's blessing of republic Supreme Soviet elections was less calculated policy than a concession wrung from him by increasingly politicized striking miners demanding radical change. In this light, Gorbachev's December 1990 call for a referendum represents a return under pressure to tried and tested policies, with new aims and intended victims: not Party hardliners and obstructionists, but independence movements in the Baltic States and elsewhere, pro-sovereignty republics, decentralizers, reformers, and Boris Yeltsin.

From the perspective of the republics, the referendum from the very outset thus suffered from the same basic strategic and tactical shortcomings as the draft Union Treaty: it was intended to maintain the center's position of dominance, and was a purely central initiative, put forward without consultation with the republics. Leaders of republics made this latter point in interviews and press conferences, when explaining that they had initially opposed holding a referendum at all.[4] Some republic leaders also argued that a referendum was unnecessary, since support among their constitutents for renewing the federation was not in question and organizing a referendum would merely squander scarce resources. Still others worried aloud about holding a referendum during a time of such instability and widespread discontent.[5]

Eventually, an absolute majority of republics, or nine out of 15, complied with Gorbachev's wish that they hold a referendum--but not necessarily according to scenario. And considering the circumstances of its genesis, it was no surprise that the referendum,

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[4] See, for example, the interview with Kazakhstan's president, Nursultan Nazarbaev, in FBIS DR Supplement, March 20, 1991, p. 72.

[5] Apart from Nazarbaev, Turkmenistan's Saparmurad Niyazov expressed this concern. See also Ann Sheehy, "The March 17 Referendum on Preservation of Union," *Report on the USSR*, Volume 3, No. 7, February 15, 1991, pp. 5-7.

to quote Kondrashov again, "conceived as a national vote of confidence in a renewed Union, also landed in the whirlpool of stormy processes and from a means of resolving crisis problems, became itself a problem, sharpening resistance in society."

Legal and Semantic Aspects of the Referendum

On December 24, 1990, the USSR Supreme Soviet approved Gorbachev's proposal to hold a referendum and on January 16, 1991, set the date of the exercise for March 17. The decision to hold the referendum was mandatory for all republics and citizens. Its results, according to the resolution, were "binding on the whole territory of the USSR and could be rescinded or altered only by means of a new referendum."[6]

The question devised for the USSR's first referendum read as follows: "Do you consider necessary the preservation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as a renewed federation of equal sovereign republics, in which the rights and freedoms of an individual of any nationality will be fully guaranteed?"

The referendum rules prescribed that the results would be valid if half of the USSR's eligible voters took part and if 50 percent-plus-one of those who did voted "Yes." As many observers quickly pointed out, only 26 percent of those on voter lists could thus decide the issue, (whereas the April 1990 law on secession required at least two-thirds of eligible voters in a republic to vote for secession to begin the process of exiting the USSR).[7]

The referendum soon came under attack from many quarters. Jurists questioned its legality, claiming that the January 16 resolution on the referendum contradicted its ostensible basis, the December 27, 1990 law on referendums. They argued that the question posed was tantamount to asking whether republics had the right to secede, a matter properly within the republics' competence, and therefore inappropriate for an all-Union referendum.[8]

Equally confusing to many were the referendum's tallying procedures. Gorbachev on December 17 had said "The results of the referendum in each republic will be the final verdict." But Yuri Kalmykov, Chairman of the USSR Supreme Soviet Legislation Committee, said that the results would be considered "both for the Union as a whole and in respect of individual republics." He concluded that Union-wide results would not be

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[6] FBIS, DR January 17, 1991, p. 17.

[7] Sheehy, p. 6.

[8] FBIS DR February 15, 1991, pp. 36-37.

binding for individual republics: "Otherwise, what would be the point of counting the votes separately of each republic?"[9]

According to other sources, the result would reflect the Union vote, "with account taken of" the tally in the republics. Exactly what that meant is unclear; perhaps Anatoly Lukyanov, Chairman of the USSR Supreme Soviet, explained it when he told *Komsomolskaya Pravda* that if fewer than half the voters in a republic participate, "the results of that vote will nonetheless be taken into account in summing up the results of the referendum for the Union as a whole."[10]

One thing about the counting *was* clear: Gorbachev, immediately after proposing the referendum on December 17, stated that a "No" vote in a republic would *not* mean its immediate and automatic secession from the Soviet Union. Soviet officials often repeated that point, specifying that the 1990 law on secession remained the only possible way for a republic to leave the USSR.[11]

The referendum question itself drew criticism from all corners. Yuri Kalmykov explained that the wording was the "product of collective work. It is not that bad, in my view."[12] But few agreed with him, including high government officials and conservatives.[13] Some of the problems were obvious: 1) the question actually contained several questions, so how could one simply answer "Yes" or "No"? 2) how could one "preserve" something that is not yet "renewed?" 3) the question assumes the survival of a "socialist" Union, leaving a voter who favored the preservation of a unified state but opposed "socialism" (whatever that means) in an awkward position.

But the less obvious difficulties were equally troubling. For example, those who wanted a renewed Union had no choice but to answer "Yes," since anything else would have been "No." As Alexander Rubtsov pointed out in *Moscow News*, No. 9, "One can vote for an alternative Union only by voting for total disintegration of the existing one." Yet an affirmative answer could be seen as support for local soviets as a form of state power, for "socialist choice," or for the government's use of harsh measures to resolve

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[9] FBIS DR February 22, 1991, p. 65.

[10] FBIS DR March 19, 1991, p. 27.

[11] Otherwise, of course, a republic seeking independence could have taken part in the referendum, voted "No" by a wide margin, and argued that it was no longer part of the USSR.

[12] FBIS DR February 22, 1991, p. 65.

[13] These included Georgi Komarov, co-chairman of the hardline *Soyuz* faction in the USSR Supreme Soviet. See FBIS DR March 15, 1991, p. 30.

interethnic tensions.[14] As for the question's final clause on the "equal rights" of all, a commentator remarked in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* on March 6 that not even USSR Supreme Soviet consultants knew where it had come from.

These considerations led the academics mentioned above to argue that the wording itself violated the referendum law, as it was "not clear and neutral" in meaning. The referendum, they concluded, was "politically undesirable, juridically inaccurate, and sociologically unprofessional" and they urged its cancellation.[15]

The central Soviet authorities dismissed these objections. Rafik Nishanov, Chairman of the Council of Nationalities of the USSR Supreme Soviet, countered that the people had a right to decide whether there should be a Union. He disputed the notion that the referendum's question was identical with one on the right of republics to secede, or whether it should or should not be in the Union.[16] Other officials took the same approach, and the "referendum train" sped on.

"Counter-Referendums"

But the speeding train soon became sidetracked, as republics and their constituent parts began responding to Gorbachev's initiative. He evidently either did not foresee--or was willing to risk--that republics pressed to hold a referendum designed to undercut their authority would counter-attack. Their obvious options were to boycott his referendum and hold their own, or they could try to use his tactic against him by altering his question or adding one to it that promoted their own interests.[17] In this way, one referendum begat others. Like the "sovereignty mania" of 1990, the referendum of 1991 came to reflect the fundamental jurisdictional and national disputes plaguing a Soviet system that has lost all legitimacy. In fact, in some cases, the posing of one question allowed others to surface that might otherwise have been awkward to raise. Whether or not they did, in turn, illuminated the correlation of political forces in regional and local governing councils. For instance, a question on the desirability of full independence for

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[14] FBIS DR February 20, 1991, p. 56. This point was made by Sergey Kozlov, deputy director of the Sociology Center of the USSR United Nations Association.

[15] FBIS DR February 15, 1991, pp. 36-37.

[16] FBIS DR February 28, 1991, p. 30.

[17] If Gorbachev did not anticipate this response, he should have: by December 1990, the "war of laws" between center and republics had already been going on for two years and showed no signs of abating. Nevertheless, Anatoly Lukyanov, Chairman of the USSR Supreme Soviet, described the referendum as an act of "formulation of the will of millions of people" and professed not to understand, "in human terms, why people want to tack on all kinds of preemptive or parallel polls to the nationwide referendum." FBIS DR March 19, 1991, p. 27.

Ukraine easily made it on the ballot in three western oblasts but could not have won the approval of the republic's Supreme Soviet in Kiev.[18]

For the Baltic States and Soviet republics determined to gain their independence, the all-Union referendum represented a serious danger. The Baltic States do not regard themselves as subject to Soviet law in any case, and agreeing to hold the March 17 referendum would have undermined this position. Besides, a strong "Yes" vote for maintaining the Union, they feared, could give Gorbachev justification for a crackdown, perhaps even the dissolution of their legislatures and the imposition of presidential rule. It was obvious, therefore, that Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia would refuse to comply.

Lithuania

Lithuania was the first to strike, announcing plans on January 17 to hold on February 9 a "public opinion poll" on independence. Lithuania, like Latvia and Estonia, had long resisted pressure from the center to hold a referendum on that issue, for several reasons: no referendums had accompanied their forcible incorporation into the USSR in 1940, and unlike the situation in Lithuania, where 80 percent of the population is Lithuanian, the influx of non-Balts into Latvia and Estonia since 1940 made the outcome there unclear. Furthermore, the April 1990 law on secession envisions a series of referendums and the Balts wanted to avoid even the appearance of compliance with that legislation. But under intense pressure from the Kremlin, especially after the violence perpetrated by Soviet "Black Berets" in January 1991, Lithuania's leaders decided to demonstrate the extent of public backing for independence and preempt anticipated Kremlin attempts after March 17 to crush Baltic hopes by pointing to "the will of the people" to keep the Union together.

On February 5, Gorbachev decreed that the plebiscite was "without legal foundation," but on February 9, voters in Lithuania went to the polls to answer "Yes" or "No" to the following question: "Do you want Lithuania to be an independent and democratic republic?" The outcome, as expected, revealed overwhelming support for independence: 85 percent of the population voted and 90.5 percent of the participants answered in the affirmative. Buoyed by these results--or perhaps resigned to undergo what, for them, was a riskier venture--Estonia and Latvia also decided to hold similar exercises on March 3, 1991.

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[18] See below, p. 21. For a list of different referendum questions see Ann Sheehy, "Fact Sheet on Questions in the Referendum of March 17 and Later Referendums," *Report on the USSR*, March 22, 1991, pp. 5-6.

Helsinki Commission staff, at the invitation of the parliaments and governments of Estonia and Latvia, observed the March 3 balloting.[19] In Estonia, about 83 percent of eligible voters took part, of whom about 78 percent answered "Yes" to the question "Do you want the restoration of the state sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Estonia?" In Latvia, where the question read "Do you support the democratic and independent statehood of the Republic of Latvia?" the corresponding figures were 87.5 and 73.6.

The most surprising result of the voting was that about half of the non-Baltic population in Estonia and Latvia voted for independence. Their show of support for Baltic aspirations undercut Kremlin efforts to portray communal friction and anti-independence sentiment in the Baltic States as primarily ethnic, as opposed to political, in origin.

By March 3, therefore, the plebiscites held in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia had served to consolidate and strengthen a unified Baltic stance vis-a-vis the Kremlin, and had shored up the political position of the local leaderships. And while Lithuania's early decision to counter Gorbachev's referendum with its own "public opinion poll" did not determine the behavior of the Soviet republics, it certainly supplied a stimulating example.

Boycotters and "Dueling Referendums"

In late January and early February the Soviet republics gradually worked out their positions on the referendum. Armenia, Moldova and Georgia followed the Baltic model and announced their intention to boycott the referendum. On February 7, the RSFSR Supreme Soviet agreed to hold the referendum, but decided on a simultaneous republic referendum. It soon became clear that other republics would adopt a similar position, forcing Gorbachev to face the possibility of numerous competing questions.

On January 30, Dmitri Golovko, Chairman of the USSR Central Commission on the Referendum, said that republic parliaments should be allowed to decide whether to "include a concrete question of the given region."[20] The Soviet leadership was less understanding: on February 25, the USSR Supreme Soviet rejected independence plebiscites in republics as legal grounds for not holding the all-Union referendum "because they have not provided an answer to the main question brought up for discussion and

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[19] A more detailed report of their findings can be obtained from the Commission on Security and Commission in Europe: "Report on the Estonian Referendum and Latvian Public Opinion Poll on Independence, March 3, 1991."

[20] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Daily Report (henceforth RFE/RL DR), January 31, 1991.

voting by the Soviet people."[21] The Supreme Soviet also declared invalid decisions by republics to block or not hold the referendum and empowered oblast, county and city soviets, as well as labor collectives at enterprises, institutions and military units in such republics to form electoral precincts. Voters could cast ballots in any polling place established under these provisions.

Ultimately, only three republics agreed to hold the referendum as Gorbachev and the USSR Supreme Soviet intended: Belorussia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. In each of these republics, there were domestic pressures either to boycott the proceedings altogether or to alter the question, but the conservative leaderships cooperated fully with Gorbachev. The legislatures of Ukraine, Azerbaijan,[22] Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan (Kirgizia) followed in Russia's steps, deciding to add a question to the all-Union wording; Kazakhstan changed the question entirely.

By the end of February, therefore, battle lines were drawn. It was clear that the referendum, instead of laying the groundwork for unity, would reflect and exacerbate existing tensions between center and republics, as the "war of laws" turned into the "clash of questions."

Democratic Opposition Movements Respond

The government's referendum initiative forced not only republics, but also political movements and individual politicians to respond. Some of the better known radical politicians, such as Leningrad mayor Anatoly Sobchak, said they would vote "No," since a "Yes" vote would constitute approval of Gorbachev's centralist concept of the Union. But the opposition movement was split, as evidenced by their varying stances: some parties called for a boycott, others urged a "No" vote and still others counseled crossing out both "Yes" and "No" -- the position Sobchak, in fact, eventually adopted.

A February 17 statement by the Inter-Regional Group of the USSR Supreme Soviet criticised the referendum's wording for its murkiness and for contradicting the USSR law on referendums, which prohibits putting any question about a republic's status or competence to a referendum. The deputies also charged that tallying the results in terms of the USSR as a whole "violates the peoples' inalienable right to self-determination." They recommended suspending preparations for the referendum and instructing the Constitutional Oversight Committee to bring the wording and procedures into line with the law. They suggested further that republic referendums might be held to approve the Union Treaty after it had gained the approval of the republics.[23]

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[21] FBIS DR February 25, 1991, p. 32.

[22] See below, p. 32.

[23] FBIS DR March 15, 1991, p. 34.

The Coordinating Council of Democratic Russia issued a statement that included the following assessment of Gorbachev's initiative: "The referendum is being conducted with the purpose of sanctifying through the 'will of the people' the anti-national dictatorship that has been prepared and is already being introduced in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Baltics and some other regions." Supporters of Democratic Russia were urged to say "No" to the all-Union question, and "Yes" to the RSFSR question.[24]

The Democratic Congress, an umbrella organization of parties and movements from 11 republics, met in Moscow on March 2-3. At the meeting's conclusion, leaders of the congress told reporters that their backers had started a campaign to disrupt the March 17 voting, but acknowledged that their efforts were not successful everywhere.[25]

At the other end of the political spectrum, a bloc of conservative movements, including deputies of *Soyuz*, the Russian Communist Party, *Yedinstvo* [Unity], headed by a pro-Stalinist chemistry teacher from Leningrad, Nina Andreeva, and the anti-Semitic *Pamyat* organization, issued a joint statement calling for affirmation of the country's "socialist choice" on March 17 by voting "Yes."

Getting Out the Vote: the Party Goes Stumping

Facing resistance from republics and political movements, the Soviet leadership mobilized the government, the CPSU apparatus and media outlets at its command to influence voters. A February 6 Politburo resolution noted that while the organization of the referendum was the job of the relevant commissions, "the CPSU cannot stand aside" and called on Party committees and organizations to explain that "the existence of the USSR objectively accords with the vital interests of all Soviet people."[26]

In several television speeches, Gorbachev offered reasons to vote in the affirmative. The underlying theme of his arguments, which the central media played up at every opportunity, was that a "No" vote would mean the actual breakup of the country (as opposed to a possibly different political order and structure). This, he warned, would have disastrous effects for the "75 million people" in the USSR who live outside their

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[24] FBIS DR March 13, 1991, pp. 34-35. For the RSFSR question, see below, p. 14.

[25] RFE/RL DR March 4, 1991.

[26] FBIS DR February 7, 1991, p. 26. *Argumenty i Fakty*, No. 10, published excerpts of documents obtained from the Moscow City CPSU Committee, which offer--apart from many other fascinating insights into the Party's propaganda techniques--sample slogans, including 1) "Your motherland is calling you. Say "Yes." 2) "Mommy! Save my future. Come and vote "Yes." 3) "Let there always be blue sky. Say "Yes." See FBIS DR March 15, 1991, p. 27.

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home republics,[27] and would cause colossal economic disruption. Gorbachev stressed the security afforded by a superpower with a well-developed scientific and cultural base. He warned of the danger of new states armed with nuclear weapons, and pointed to the desire of the West to see the USSR remain a unified country.

This theme of "the Union or Chaos" steadily intensified, reaching virtual fever pitch as March 17 approached. In a remarkable address on March 15, Gorbachev called on citizens to save a state put together by so many generations, sacrifices and effort and promised that a "Yes" vote would ensure the continuation of reforms.

Another government propaganda tactic involved offering voters different interpretations of what they were voting for. For example, Yuri Kalmykov said the goal of the referendum was "to determine the attitude of the country's population toward our form of government....Socialist or non-socialist, a soviet system or not."[28] But on March 9, USSR Vice-President Gennadi Yanaev said on television that "during the referendum we answer the main question: we come out in favor of a united state, in favor of a state. We are not discussing the form of the state structure or the nature of the structure...we will determine the choice of structure...when we sign the Treaty of the Union of sovereign republics."[29] Several commentators concluded that such contradictory statements were deliberate, a clever ploy designed to confuse voters who would then fall back on the familiar and vote for the Union.[30]

Finally, the Soviet authorities exploited to the fullest their control of the airwaves to sway voters. CPSU Politburo member Petr Luchinsky claimed that "all political movements and parties can have their say...in the mass media..."[31] But opponents of the referendum had virtually no chance of reaching the public through the central media. Boris Yeltsin--whenever he could get airtime--played down dire prophecies of doom and destruction, arguing that a "No" vote would not have any frightful consequences.

In short, having set the referendum in motion, Gorbachev was resolved to see it through, despite unmistakable signals from the republics that they were equally determined

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[27] In official sources, the number of such people in the USSR has risen steadily as the crisis in the country has escalated. Not so long ago, the figure generally cited was 60 million. Anatoly Lukyanov provided a figure of 70 million. FBIS DR March 19, 1991, p. 27.

[28] FBIS DR February 22, 1991, p. 65.

[29] FBIS DR March 11, 1991, p. 38.

[30] See *Moscow News*, No. 9, 1991. It is possible, however, that these contradictory statements represented confusion on the part of officials themselves.

[31] FBIS DR March 15, 1991, p. 27.

to subvert it. The Soviet leadership thereupon pulled out all the stops in a campaign in which nothing, apparently, was left to chance: a fuzzy question that strove to appeal to all citizens, who could interpret it as they wished; confusing counting procedures (in case anything went wrong), and a non-stop media blitz in favor of the referendum while denying nay-sayers access to countrywide outlets. One commentator concluded that "the referendum is sure to succeed. They wouldn't gamble if they were unsure of the outcome. They never do in this country."[32]

Mandate for What?

Despite all the exhortations, explanations and promises, it was never quite clear what the referendum might give Gorbachev, even in his best-case scenario. One frequently heard opinion held that a successful referendum would endow him--an unelected leader--with a much needed form of legitimacy. Another school of thought saw Gorbachev strengthened by the referendum against the growing onslaught of the democratic opposition. But many also openly worried that a solid "Yes" vote would allow him to justify repressive measures against recalcitrant republic leaderships by appealing to the will of the people to save the Union. Lithuania's president Landsbergis and Anatoly Gorbunovs, Chairman of Latvia's Supreme Council, voiced this concern, the latter adding that the imposition of presidential rule in the Baltic States could ensue. Radical deputy Galina Starovoitova warned that a similar fate might befall the Russian legislature, and her colleague Yuri Afanasyev wrote in the March 15 *Wall Street Journal* that the referendum was designed to sanction violence already perpetrated by the regime in Tbilisi, Baku and Vilnius, and "the violence now being prepared."

A less sinister, if highly political, interpretation identified Gorbachev's success in the referendum with intensified central pressure on republics to sign the Union Treaty, which had been undergoing revision since December 1990.[33] To make the murkier aspects of the referendum more concrete, perhaps also to allay the concerns of those who feared the worst, and apparently mindful of public confusion about what sort of Union voters might anticipate, Gorbachev pushed negotiators to approve the basics of the document, so that it could be released before March 17.

The New Union Treaty

Compared to the November 1990 version, the draft of March 1991 made notable concessions to the republics, evidence that their complaints and reservations had been heard. This was not surprising, since the republics played a much more active role in its

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[32] *Moscow News*, No. 9, 1991.

[33] Yuri Prokofyev, first secretary of the Moscow City CPSU Committee, made this connection explicit in a March 15 interview with *Moskovskaya Pravda*: "Everybody can make a conscious choice on the [all-Union] question by reading the published draft of the Union Treaty and understanding that this is the renewed Union they are voting for."

formulation. Plenipotentiaries of 26 republics--8 Union republics (minus Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Moldavia, Georgia and Armenia) and 18 former autonomous republics--labored on the revisions. Representatives of Azerbaijan, as well as of the Russian-speaking population of Estonia, attended working meetings as "observers."[34]

Evidence of their input surfaces in the first paragraph's acknowledgment of the republics' declarations of sovereignty, which, republic leaders had complained, the center had never taken seriously. A related novelty is the recognition (indirect, to be sure) of the treaties and agreements concluded between republics. Moreover, the draft specifically states that the Union Treaty is to be ratified by "authorized delegations of the republics," whereas the earlier version had tellingly said nothing about the means of ratification.

The article from the November 1990 draft providing for the expulsion of a republic from the Union is gone, and there is explicit recognition of the right to secede "in the manner prescribed by the parties to the treaty" -- a sign, perhaps, that the April 1990 law on secession is not written in stone.

Evolution is particularly noticeable in the sphere of foreign policy, which the November draft had assigned wholly to the Union. Now the definition of the country's foreign policy course is done by the Union "together with the republics," which are "fully fledged members of the international community." Their rights include the establishment of direct diplomatic, consular, trade and other ties with foreign states, including participation in international organizations and concluding treaties with foreign states, (so long as they do not infringe on the interests of any of the republics or violate the USSR's international commitments).

Another important change concerns the very contentious matter of ownership. Republics are recognized as owners of natural resources on their territory, and whereas the November 1990 draft conceded this point "except for that portion essential for implementation of the Union's responsibilities," now the Union may use such resources on a *contractual* basis. Republics also create the legislative framework for the Union's use of their resources, and they are entitled to a share of the country's gold, diamonds and foreign currency reserves.

Despite these innovations, however, the draft decribes the USSR as a federal state. The USSR--i.e., the center--retains control of the "organization of defense and the leadership of the USSR Armed Forces," and there is a "single procedure for the draft." This would bar republic armies, which are specifically envisioned by the sovereignty declarations of some republics. Perhaps as compensation, republics gain some role in

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[34] FBIS DR March 13, 1991, pp. 31-32. See also *Soyuz*, No. 11, March 1991.

defining state security and military strategy, and resolving questions related to the stationing of troops and military installations in republics.

The draft also preserves much central control of economic matters, enshrining a single financial, credit, monetary, taxation and price policy (precluding separate currencies, another provision of some republic sovereignty declarations). On the other hand, republics reserve the "right to the autonomous solution of all questions of their development," a contradiction certain to raise difficulties and disputes. And in the crucial "war of laws," the draft gives Union legislation primacy on matters within its competence and obligates republics to implement such legislation. Disputes over jurisdiction are submitted to a USSR Constitutional Court if they are not resolved through conciliation procedures. But the draft, like its predecessor, says nothing about the membership or procedures of that crucial body.

Two other features of the proposed "renewed Union" that remained unchanged from November 1990 to March 1991 concern provisions for a popularly elected head of state. The USSR president is to be elected directly by universal, secret ballot and must win over half of the votes "cast in the Union as a whole and in the majority of the republics." This formulation theoretically could give a candidate the great majority of ballots cast (e.g., if most eligible Slavs voted for him), yet deprive him of the presidency if most voters in non-Slavic republics voted against him.

Another troublesome issue was language; the draft recognizes Russian as the "official language" of the USSR; a change from the earlier draft's designation of Russian as the "state" language. But this distinction was lost on members of Ukraine's *Rukh* movement, whose representatives objected that such privileged status for Russian would effectively nullify the language laws of sovereign republics.

In sum, the publication of the draft Union Treaty did not help clarify matters much. Many questions remained unanswered about delineation of spheres of competence and means of resolving disputes. Particularly contentious was the provision that republics "belong to the Union directly, or as part of other republics." As Boris Yeltsin pointed out, that could lead to Russia's disintegration, if its autonomous republics decided to secede. And as for the independence-bound Baltic States and some Soviet republics, the Union Treaty was simply irrelevant. They took no part in its formulation and rejected any application of any of its provisions to themselves. That in itself diminished the significance of the reworked document purporting to show Soviet voters what they might gain by voting "Yes" on March 17.

II. OBSERVATION OF THE BALLOTING

Helsinki Commission staff observed the voting on March 17 in Russia, Ukraine, Latvia and Kazakhstan, as well as the March 31 referendum on independence in Georgia. Their reports, supplemented by later information from published sources, follow below.

Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR)

If the referendum's primary purpose was to give the center the weapon of broad public mandate against the republics, in Russia it immediately took on an additional, highly personalized coloration. The confrontation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin reflects not only the power struggle between center and republics but the touchy relationship between two individuals, whose battles have become a mainstay of Soviet politics and the Soviet and international press. It was natural that Yeltsin would perceive Gorbachev's plans for a referendum as a threat and would respond accordingly.

On January 25, the Presidium of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet agreed to hold the all-Union referendum and recommended that the Supreme Soviet consider additional questions. In the ensuing deliberations, Yeltsin managed to have added to the ballot a question more to his liking: "Do you consider necessary the introduction of the position of President of the RSFSR, elected by universal suffrage?"

The possibility of establishing such a post had arisen in December 1990, and Yeltsin was the obvious front-runner, if not shoo-in. Winning the presidency would, first, give him the broad mandate Gorbachev so painfully lacks and has feared to seek, and, second, elevate him above the legislature, removing the concern that conservative deputies could conspire to depose him. Having given Yeltsin this victory, the Supreme Soviet on February 7 passed a resolution to hold both referendums on March 17.

Anti-Yeltsin forces, spearheaded by the Russian Communist Party (RCP) and its backers, assailed his maneuver as not merely subversive but illegal. The RCP newspaper, *Sovietskaya Rossiya*, accused the Supreme Soviet presidium under Yeltsin's chairmanship of a multitude of sins, ranging from misrepresenting the amount of support among deputies for proposed additional questions to violating the RSFSR constitution. These latter improprieties allegedly involved exceeding the competence of the Presidium and non-compliance with the provisions of the October 1990 RSFSR law on referendums.

The publicizing of these charges did nothing to slow the Yeltsin bandwagon, propelled by his burgeoning popularity. Despite calls by Gorbachev's spokesmen not to see the referendum as a duel between Gorbachev and Yeltsin, many people did, including the principals themselves. In a speech recorded and played to a large rally, Yeltsin said of the referendum: "We have to determine our position concerning the Union. That is to

say, support for Gorbachev."[35] Yeltsin did not urge voters to say "No" to Gorbachev's question, perhaps for fear that his standing among Russians might fall, but he often hinted at this preference.[36]

Gorbachev, for his part, told reporters on March 17 that he would respect the opinion of Russians on the desirability of a popularly-elected president. But, he added, if such a leader enjoyed powers envisioned in the draft Russian constitution [such as commander-in-chief of the Russian armed forces!] there was no possibility of a Union of sovereign states or retaining the Union. The Soviet president thus made explicit that as far as he was concerned, the all-Union question and the RSFSR question were incompatible.

As a result, voters in the RSFSR were presented with two very different political personalities, holding different visions of the country's future. Yet most people, and their representatives, focused their attention and concern on more immediate problems, such as rising unemployment and an impending price hike. The March 17 referendum in Russia was thus simultaneously controversial and irrelevant.

Regional and Municipal Questions

Yeltsin had scored points against Gorbachev, but his own turn soon came. As republics' sovereignty declarations in 1990 generated analogous responses from their constituent parts, so now did the RSFSR referendum elicit reactions mirroring the political calculus inside the republic. Regions and cities in the RSFSR took a lead from Yeltsin and devised additional questions of their own. Some merely reflected local concerns. For example, authorities in Kamchatka and Sakhalin sought popular approval of measures to restrict the migration of people from other regions.

On March 6, the Moscow City Council decided to present voters with yet a third question, (in addition to the all-Union and RSFSR ballots): "Do you consider it necessary to have direct elections for the mayor of Moscow by the city's residents?" The question was of a purely informational character, according to a City Council official, and was motivated by the ineffectiveness of the city's government and the corresponding need to strengthen executive power.[37]

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[35] FBIS DR March 11, 1991, p. 69.

[36] A western correspondent inferred from Yeltsin's March 15 radio interview that he "made clear he saw a no vote as the most sensible course, saying that it would send a warning to the Kremlin that radical policy changes are needed." Michael Dobbs, "Gorbachev Urges Vote to Keep Union Together," *Washington Post*, March 16, 1991.

[37] *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, March 9, 1991.

In other regions, however, the attitudes of local governing councils to the RSFSR referendum reflected the ongoing battle between the republic and its constituent parts, a contest Gorbachev's center had long been stoking to weaken Yeltsin. On February 22, the Smolensk Oblast soviet decided not to conduct the Russian referendum, on the grounds that it violated the RSFSR Constitution and the RSFSR law on refrendums. North Ossetia's soviet followed suit on March 2.

As regional resistance mounted, the RSFSR commission on the referendum called on organs of state power to do everything possible to ensure that people could vote. On March 4, in an ironic mirror image of the February 25 USSR Supreme Soviet decree aimed at republics, the Presidium of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet authorized local soviets to organize voting in regions where district commissions were not conducting the RSFSR referendum. The same day, Yeltsin's first deputy Ruslan Khasbulatov signed a resolution "deputizing" RSFSR parliamentarians as official observers, to help organize the referendum.[38]

These efforts were not entirely successful. Eventually, Tatarstan, Tambov, Chechen-Ingushetia, Tuva and Ryazan joined Smolensk and North Ossetia in refusing to hold the RSFSR referendum. Some of these decisions were apparently linked to the ongoing difficulties in the negotiations on the Union Treaty. At a March 6 meeting of the Federation Council, Gorbachev favored the inclusion of Russia's autonomous formations as direct subjects of the treaty. Yeltsin balked, saying he would not approve the draft under those circumstances, since it threatened the disintegration of Russia.[39] Another factor, as the chairman of the Legislation Committee of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet explained, was the desire of local Communist Party officials in certain regions and cities to undermine Boris Yeltsin's position.

As a result, in Russia, as in the Union, the battle lines were clearly drawn. The Chairman of the RSFSR Commission on the Referendum felt compelled to denounce efforts by Soviet and Russian legislators to campaign against one or the other referendum.[40] Both Gorbachev and Yeltsin could look forward to March 17 with anticipation, and trepidation.

The Voting

By early March, almost 100,000 electoral commissions had been formed in the RSFSR. The estimated cost of organizing the vote was 113 million rubles.

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[38] *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, March 8, 1991. On March 11, the USSR Supreme Soviet continued the dance, passing a similar resolution for USSR deputies to observe the all-Union referendum.

[39] *Kommersant*, March 4-11, 1991.

[40] FBIS DR March 8, 1991, p. 73.

Helsinki Commission observation of the balloting in Moscow on March 17 produced nothing calling into question the integrity of the voting procedures themselves.[41] Although voting seemed to proceed regularly, the actual voting and counting were not well documented by foreign and domestic monitors. Commission staff saw voters marking their ballots in public and joining family members in voting booths, both practices observed by Commission staff in previous elections in the USSR.

However, both the government's handling of the pre-vote campaign and the all-Union question itself made the referendum less than straightforward and raise the question of fairness. When asked to explain their votes, people often fell back on their gut feelings towards the center and the two leaders (Gorbachev and Yeltsin), along the lines of: "I don't understand the question but I know I'm for the Union" or "I favor preservation of the Union but not Gorbachev's."

Unequal media coverage and treatment of the issue also hampered Russian citizens' ability to make a free and informed choice. Media freedom has been sharply cut back throughout the USSR since December 1990; the opposition has practically lost its access to countrywide television, censorship is making a comeback and journalists report stepped-up harassment. National television did not air the views of those who voted "No," but frequently broadcast lengthy programs urging a "Yes" vote. Gorbachev's speech on March 15 was carried live on the evening news; Yeltsin was able to make his pitch only through Radio Rossii and the RSFSR newspaper, *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*. Central Soviet television refused Yeltsin's request for 30 minutes of air time on March 15, and Yeltsin, in turn, rejected a last-minute offer for ten minutes.[42] On March 12, Leonid Kravchenko, the head of all-Union State Television and Radio, told Novosti that he believed Yeltsin might urge people to ignore the referendum or make other "anti-constitutional statements."[43]

Nevertheless, the results in the RSFSR may have been affected more by voter apathy than by irregularities. At polling stations in downtown Moscow and in suburban high-rises, elderly voters predominated, suggesting that voting was based on old habits and that the issue had failed to seize the imagination and passion of the discouraged, apathetic younger generation.[44]

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[41] Radio Rossii, the station of the RSFSR, has charged in its broadcasts that there were, in fact, numerous irregularities designed to rig the outcome in favor of the all-Union referendum.

[42] Michael Dobbs, "Gorbachev Urges Vote to Keep Union Together," *Washington Post*, March 16, 1991.

[43] RFE/RL DR March 13, 1991.

[44] The *Financial Times* correspondent in Moscow observed similar patterns in a March 18 report.

Results

75.3 percent of voters in the RSFSR took part in the referendum, of whom, TASS reported on March 25, about 73 percent voted "Yes" to the all-Union question, and about 70 percent approved creating the post of republic president. Approximately 28 percent of participants voted against the republic referendum, and about 2 percent of ballots were invalid.

On March 18, the Presidium of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet ruled that the creation of a popularly elected presidency in the republic was not a constitutional matter, so its passage only required the approval of over half of those voting, as opposed to half of all eligible voters. *Sovietskaya Rossiya* on March 20 cried foul, and reminded readers that Yeltsin on March 15 had said that over half of Russia's voters had to vote "Yes" on the republic referendum for it to pass. *Sovietskaya Rossiya* charged that the Yeltsin-chaired Presidium had changed the rules in midstream because voting results in 14 of 16 republics constituting the RSFSR had been negative.[45]

Whether or not Boris Yeltsin actually "cooked the books," while important, is not really significant. The popular perception inside and outside the USSR and the RSFSR is that about as many people in Russia voted for a popularly elected president--namely, Boris Yeltsin and whatever he represents--as voted to preserve the Union represented by Mikhail Gorbachev. Attacked by Gorbachev via an appeal to the public, Yeltsin struck back with a maneuver to strengthen his own position, demonstrating anew his willingness to fight and his tactical skills.

The results of the RSFSR referendum effectively nullified whatever gains Gorbachev might have derived from the all-Union question. Yeltsin's subsequent rout of his opponents at the extraordinary session of the Russian Congress of People's Deputies (which was called in hopes of deposing him) has set the stage for his election as president of the RSFSR. That, in turn, presages the emergence of a Yeltsin-led RSFSR government pretending to equal power with the center, a government increasingly perceived by reformers as the best hope of wrenching the country out of paralysis and decline.

Latvia

On March 6, the Latvian Supreme Council ruled that the March 17 referendum had "no legal effect on Latvia" and that election committees established for the March 3 advisory vote on independence would not cooperate. TASS reported on March 7 that representatives of some 17 organizations would conduct the referendum, including the Communist Party, Intermovement and the United Council of Labor Collectives (both of

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[45] Ann Sheehy has speculated that if not for the change in the counting rules, the RSFSR referendum might, in fact, not have passed. RFE/RL DR March 21, 1991.

which have a heavily Russian constituency and are linked to enterprises under all-Union jurisdiction), deputies belonging to *Soyuz*, and local government authorities in those areas under non-Latvian control, such as Daugavpils and Rezekne, and, significantly, by the Soviet military.

Media Treatment

Print media loyal to Latvia's parliamentary majority, the Popular Front, largely ignored the referendum, occasionally publishing articles explaining the reasons for the government's non-participation. The central Soviet press, the newspapers of Latvia's pro-Moscow Communist Party, such as *Sovietskaya Latvia* and the local Daugavpils newspaper, campaigned unrelentingly for heavy voter participation and a positive response to the referendum question. Readers were warned that no response or, worse, a "No" response, would lead to chaos and civil war and that an independent Latvia would surely make all non-Latvians second-class citizens or drive them from the country.

Electronic media generally mirrored the print medium. Central television and radio agitated incessantly for support of the Union while Latvian television emphasized that the referendum did not concern Latvia, since the vast majority of Latvian citizens (ethnic Latvians as well as "Russian-language" residents) had voted two weeks earlier for Latvian independence from the Soviet Union. One editor of a local paper in Rezekne, a largely non-Latvian community, reported threats of imprisonment by local Communist Party officials and the local Soviet prosecutor for refusing to run an editorial urging support for the referendum and listing the polling places.

The Voting

Helsinki Commission staff visited both Rezekne and Daugavpils on Thursday, March 14.[46] Although it was the first day of the four-day voting period and voting had just barely started, it was possible to talk with local election commission officials and to get an explanation of voting procedures. In Rezekne, each polling place had lists of voters from the district in question. Several polling places served double or triple districts, since in a number of places the regular polling place was not available. These unavailable venues were normally institutions such as schools and regional council buildings, where the administration was loyal to the Latvian Parliament and which, accordingly, had refused to participate in what was viewed as a "Soviet" matter. Each polling place had voter lists copied from those used during the March 3 plebiscite on Latvian independence. When asked about would-be voters whose names were not on the list, the election officials replied that such people could vote at one special polling place upon producing identification attesting to their Soviet citizenship.

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[46] RFE/RL reported on March 15 that of the 178 polling places opened on March 14, 129 were located in military units. According to TASS, a total of 322 polling places were eventually established.

The situation in Daugavpils was similar to that in Rezekne, except that election officials there claimed that no one who was not on the election rolls would be able to vote without proving local residency. It should be noted that it was not possible to visit military barracks where different rules for voter eligibility were in force.

In Riga, Latvia's capital, the election situation was probably more easily characterized by its irregularities than by its orthodoxy. Many polling places had no voter lists at all, and those which did accepted any and all comers whether they were on the list or not. The only requirement to vote was some piece of identification showing Soviet citizenship. Such identification actually accepted for voting in Riga ranged from official passports to motor vehicle registration cards. A special polling place was set up on the platform of the Riga train station and announcements were made on incoming trains encouraging every traveller to stop and vote. People who voted at this polling place included people registered in Moscow, Lviv, Leningrad and a number of other cities outside of Latvia. The fact that voters did not have to appear on a list or even prove residency in a voting district, of course, created a situation which begs for abuse. In order to test the system, one newspaper reporter cast five ballots in the space of one hour and even used an Estonian passport with someone else's picture one of those times.

Results

The most recent reports from official Soviet sources on the March 17 referendum indicate that 415,147, or 95 percent of participants in the referendum in Latvia voted "Yes"; four percent voted "No"; and one percent of the ballots were invalid. These results do not include ballots cast at military posts.[47] Such figures, however, must be viewed with scepticism due to the irregularities mentioned above. Even if the announced results were reasonably accurate, they cannot provide reliable statistics about how people living in Latvia feel about preserving the Soviet Union, since there is no guarantee that those who voted were residents of Latvia.

In sum, a certain number of individuals (no one can be sure how many) voted in the Soviet referendum at polling places in Latvia on March 17. Most of them certainly voted to preserve the Union. But the results do not show anything valid about how the majority of those living in Latvia feel about the Union. Those attitudes are knowable only from the March 3 plebiscite.

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[47] Members of the armed forces stationed in Latvia were not permitted to vote in the March 3 advisory vote on independence.

Background

The two republic-wide ballot questions in Ukraine, and the third in the more independence-minded regions of western Ukraine, essentially reflected the current political struggle between the center and the republics. They also reflected the attitudes of the people of Ukraine towards the future of the Soviet Union -- whether it should continue as a "renewed federation," (the all-Union question), or as a confederation or commonwealth of sovereign republics (the Ukrainian republic question). Moreover, the referendum shed light on some of the dynamics in the Ukrainian legislature, as illustrated by the debates on whether to have a supplementary question and what form it should take.

Despite initial calls by the Communist Party majority within the Ukrainian parliament (Supreme Soviet) for the referendum to carry only the all-Union question, pressure from the democratic opposition Narodna Rada (National Council) and some moderate communists resulted in a February 13, 1991 decision by a vote of 287-47 to add a specific republic question. On February 27, the Ukrainian parliament (Supreme Soviet) adopted the text for this supplementary question, which, proposed by Ukrainian Supreme Soviet Presidium Chairman Leonid Kravchuk, represented a compromise among the various groupings within the parliament. More importantly, however, it also revealed a split among the communist majority faction, as about one-third of its members joined with the democratic opposition in voting for the proposal set forth by the Presidium, thus breaking ranks with Ukrainian Communist Party leader Stanislav Hurenko. This division between hardline and moderate Communist Party deputies could have a profound impact on the Ukrainian political scene.

The Ukrainian Popular Movement *Rukh*, which advocates state independence for Ukraine, pressed for a more unequivocal republic question on independence, but recognized that the compromise question that was adopted represented "the optimum victory possible in the kind of parliament we have today," according to Oles Shevchenko, a National Council deputy from Kiev.

On February 16, the Galician Assembly, composed of deputies from the three west Ukrainian oblasts of Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, and Ternopil, formulated a third question on Ukraine's independence outside the Union. Western Ukraine, which came under Soviet control only during World War II, has been in the forefront of Ukrainian moves towards independence.

The Question and Procedures

Participants in the referendum were given two separate ballots. In addition to the all-Union question, the republic plebiscite asked: "Do you agree that Ukraine should be

part of a Union of Soviet Sovereign Republics on the basis of the declaration on the state sovereignty of Ukraine?"

In the three western oblasts of Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk and Ternopil, voters were also asked to respond to a third question: "Do you agree that Ukraine should be an independent state, which independently decides its domestic and foreign policies, which guarantees the equal rights of all citizens, regardless of nationality and religion?"

The regulations governing the voting were basically the same as for the 1990 Ukrainian Supreme Soviet elections. The republic was divided into 34,089 voting districts.

Participants and Boycotters

Attitudes towards the all-Union and republic-wide questions were complicated by political as well as regional differences. The Communist Party leadership supported both questions but while it launched a massive propaganda campaign to coax the citizens of Ukraine into voting "Yes" for the Union, communists--especially the hard-liners among them--exhibited far less visible backing and enthusiasm for the republic question.

The democratic opposition was united in its rejection of the all-Union referendum but divided on how to vote on the second question. *Rukh* (with the exception of local committees in some west Ukrainian oblasts) supported the republic question, viewing a positive vote for sovereignty as a step towards independence. *Rukh* and other democratic opposition organizations ultimately endorsed participation in the referendum, consistent with their position on supporting the "parliamentary path to independence."

The Ukrainian Republican Party (formerly, the Ukrainian Helsinki Union) was divided internally on the republic question; some of its members urged a vote against it on the grounds that a favorable vote still meant inclusion in a Union instead of complete independence.

The Ukrainian Inter-Party Assembly, a coalition of mostly small and militant parties, urged a total boycott of the referendum, arguing that a fair vote was impossible while Ukraine still had "a colonial administration and an army of occupation" on its territory.

Observers

Approximately 10,000 of the 34,000 districts in Ukraine had *Rukh* observers at the polls, including *Rukh* representatives on local election commissions. Several trainloads of *Rukh* observers from western Ukraine traveled to polling sites in eastern Ukraine, where the Communist Party apparatus is still entrenched. *Rukh* was also represented on the republic's Central Electoral Commission by its vice-chairman, Oleksander Lavrynovych.

U.S. Consul-General Jon Gundersen, Vice-Consul John Stepanchuk, Canadian Consul-General Nestor Gayowsky, journalists from Ukraine, Great Britain and the United

States and members of the International Management Institute and the Harvard Project on Economic Reform joined Commission staff in visiting seven polling places in Kiev and surrounding villages on March 17. They experienced no problems in gaining access to the polling sites or talking with election officials.

The Campaign and Media

Both proponents and opponents of the all-Union referendum waged an intensive campaign before the voting. On March 1, 1991, at a meeting of Central Committee secretaries of republic Communist Party organizations, the participants unanimously agreed that the referendum "will take place under conditions of the most intense political struggle" and called upon Party organs "to give a decisive rebuff to separatist, nationalist and chauvinist strivings." Indeed, the Party's control over the levers of power, while weaker than it was even a year ago, remains considerable. The Party enjoyed the advantage of abundant resources and overwhelming access to and control of the official media.

Rukh and other democratic organizations staged several large rallies and were able to print several million leaflets calling for a "No" vote on the all-Union ballot and a "Yes" vote on the republic question. Opposition newspapers, especially in western Ukraine, urged votes against the all-Union question. Nevertheless, they were no match for the well-equipped and connected Party apparatus. Democratic opposition access to republic television was virtually non-existent, and a request by *Rukh* for air-time on republic television prior to the referendum was denied. Large banners in Kiev and other Ukrainian cities exhorted citizens to vote "Yes" on the all-Union question, some of them claiming that the disintegration of the Union would lead to further destabilization.

The Voting

In most polling sites visited by Commission staff and other observers in Kiev and surrounding villages, the voting process appeared to be, on the whole, orderly and properly conducted. Some featured elaborate buffets at reasonable prices consisting of some hard-to-find goods. The majority of the polling sites had *Rukh* or Green World observers.

Despite efforts to make the voting process free and fair, observers found some procedural irregularities. The most blatant violation took place in the Darnitsa region of Kiev, where several voters received multiple ballots. Commission staff was told the voters were casting ballots for sick or absent relatives and, according to one local election official, this represented perhaps one percent of total votes cast. Observers, however, noticed a substantially greater number than one percent receiving extra ballots. Furthermore, election officials are supposed to take a special ballot box to the residences of the sick, a procedure which appeared to be practiced in all the other polling stations visited.

Another violation (of decree No. 15 of the Central Election Commission's procedures), apparently limited to Kiev, was that both the all-Union referendum and republic questions were printed on the same color paper. As both ballots were to be

placed in the same ballot box, this was a prescription for confusion, or manipulation, in counting the votes.

There were other allegations of violations, including intimidation, especially in eastern rural areas. Voters in some villages, for example, were reportedly told that fuel supplies would not be forthcoming unless the overall village vote favored the all-Union question. In other villages, there were reports of Communist Party officials intimidating people with the threat that they would know how individuals voted, despite the purported secrecy of the ballot. Also, some invitations to vote, sent by local election boards, urged people "to preserve the Union as a single state."

In Crimea and in some cities in eastern and southern Ukraine, *Rukh* activists were detained by militia organs; thousands of their leaflets were confiscated and not returned until the referendum balloting started. And in Odessa and Mykolayiv in southern Ukraine, confrontations were reported when democratic observers were prevented from monitoring polling places.

Many individuals who spoke to Commission staff complained about the vague and confusing nature of the all-Union question and felt it was designed to elicit a positive response. Others complained of confusion in filling out the ballot properly (i.e., crossing out the answer one did not want), especially since in previous elections, this process had been different.

Results

On March 22, the Central Election Commission for the USSR referendum in Ukraine reported that 31.5 million citizens, or 83.5 percent of those eligible, took part in the voting on March 17. Of these, 22 million, or 70.16 percent, answered "Yes" to the all-Union question and 8.8 million, or 27.99 percent, voted "No." In Kiev, only 44 percent voted "Yes" to the all-Union question. Support for the Union was lowest in the Lviv oblast (16.4 percent).

On the republic question asserting Ukraine's sovereignty, of the 31.5 million, or 83.48 percent of eligible voters who took part, 25.2 million, or 80.17 percent answered "Yes" and 5.6 million, or 17.97 percent, anwered "No." In every oblast except for Crimea, the republic question received higher voter endorsement than the all-Union one. Significantly, support for the republic question in oblasts where Russians constitute a majority or near-majority exceeded 80 percent. Chairman of the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet's International Affairs Commission and *Rukh* member Dmytro Pavlychko concluded that Moscow could no longer see the Russian minority in Ukraine as a bastion of support for a Union on Moscow's terms.

On the so-called "Galician question" in west Ukraine, an overwhelming majority of 85 percent voted in favor of an independent Ukrainian state -- 83.3 percent in Lviv oblast,

85 percent in Ternopil oblast, and 87.9 percent in Ivano-Frankivsk oblast. In these three oblasts, less than 20 percent answered "Yes" to the all-Union question, and less than half supported the republic ballot.

Political Implications

The results of the various referendum questions send a seemingly contradictory message. Ukrainian voters supported membership in a renewed Soviet Union, but their affirmative response to the republic ballot indicates that the Union they desire more closely resembles a commonwealth of states. The far-reaching Declaration on Sovereignty of Ukraine, the basis on which the people of Ukraine want to be part of any Union, clearly goes beyond the "renewed federation" envisioned by Gorbachev.

This declaration, adopted by an overwhelming vote of the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet in July 1990, asserted the primacy of Ukraine's legislation over USSR law and established the right of Ukraine to create its own currency and national bank, raise its own army, maintain relations with foreign countries, collect tariffs and erect borders. The declaration also expresses the desire to have Ukraine become a neutral state and rejected the "production, deployment and use of nuclear weapons."

The strong support for Ukrainian sovereignty, notwithstanding the victory of the all-Union question, can serve to strengthen Ukraine's hand in the continuing negotiations with the center over the new Union Treaty, which offers less than the declaration envisions. Issues such as that of property ownership, taxation, structure of government and judiciary and joint powers of Ukraine and the Union remain to be settled.

The victory of the republic plebiscite among most sectors of Ukrainian society also provides a strong mandate for the Ukrainian parliament to implement the declaration's provisions. Given the opposition of not only the center, but of hardline communists in the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet, this will not be an easy task, although the new Ukrainian Constitution will almost certainly delegate significantly more powers to Ukraine than the March 9 draft Union Treaty. The democratic opposition Narodna Rada (National Council) will undoubtedly continue to press for speedier and more concrete implementation of the Declaration's provisions.

Another important political development is the overwhelming support for independence in Galician western Ukraine, where voters narrowly voted down the republic question as insufficiently pro-independence. As voters in most of the republic did not have the opportunity to speak out on independence, it is hard to know their views on this issue. Nevertheless, republic-wide support for independence almost certainly would not have been as high as in Galicia, although, based on recent opinion polls, this question might very well have received a majority vote. Significant differences remain between Galicia and other areas of Ukraine, especially with respect to the pace of political change.

These differences seem to be narrowing but failure to bridge the gap could negatively affect Ukraine's political future.

To be sure, differences in approaches exist regarding the pace of moves towards independence. Nevertheless, there is a national consensus emerging in Ukraine on the need for genuine sovereignty -- on loosening if not completely breaking the bonds of the center.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan's authorities originally opposed holding the referendum, seeing it as a central initiative and arguing that it was needed only in those republics where the population was split about leaving the USSR. But under the leadership of Kazakhstan's president Nursultan Nazarbaev, the republic's parliament found an ingenious way to comply with Gorbachev's wishes while asserting its own sovereignty. Kazakhstan was the only Soviet republic to hold the all-Union referendum that did not add its own question but simply altered Gorbachev's preferred wording.

Erik Asanbaev, the Chairman of the Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet, explained to *Pravda* on March 15 that the all-Union question had itself raised many questions and seemed "somewhat ponderous and diffuse" to the republic's legislators. At an extraordinary session of the Supreme Soviet on February 15, 259 of 286 deputies voted to make it "simpler and more comprehensible."

The product of their editing was: "Do you consider it necessary to maintain the USSR as a Union of sovereign states of equal rights"? As for clauses in the all-Union question on "renewing the federation" and the "equality of rights of all peoples," Asanbaev said that these notions were stressed in a number of documents recently signed by Kazakhstan and appeared in the republic's declaration of sovereignty. He did not discuss whether the use of the word "state" (as opposed to "republic") had any particular significance.[48] Asanbaev concluded that the results of voting in Kazakhstan would be "an organic part" of the outcome of the all-Union balloting.

As confirmation of the basic congruity between the two questions, *Pravda* adduced the opinion to that effect of Vladimir Kudryavtsev, vice-president of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, and Boris Topornin, director of the Academy's Institute of State and Law. They argued that Kazakhstan's question did not contradict the essence of the all-Union

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[48] Boris Yeltsin appears to think so: on March 9, he said "There is a great difference between a republic and a state....it is not just a matter of a name but...a principle, the division of property, the division of functions." FBIS DR March 11, 1991, p. 69.

referendum: the missing words and concepts were integral parts of the Union Treaty, which Kazakhstan's leadership supported, so the two formulations were "reconcilable."

This judgement hardly constituted a ringing endorsement of essential identity between these two questions. In fact, *Pravda*'s fairly objective exposition of Kazakhstan's initiative did not accurately reflect the attitude of the central authorities. USSR Supreme Soviet chairman Anatoly Lukyanov told deputies on March 6 that Kazakhstan had insisted on its own wording despite pressure from the Supreme Soviet and instructions to Nazarbaev at a March 6 Federation Council meeting to toe the line.[49] Nazarbaev himself gave *Komsomolskaya Pravda* on April 13 a more vivid picture, reporting that "Every day either the president himself [Gorbachev] or his aides would telephone" to pressure him about the question.[50]

According to democratic political activists in Alma-Ata, national-demographic considerations in Kazakhstan also influenced the wording of the question. In a republic of 16 million people, about 40 percent of the population is Kazakh, another 40 percent is Russian, the remainder is mixed and the last year has witnessed a deterioration in relations between Russians and Kazakhs, especially over Kazakhstan's language law. So the question, by incorporating both the preservation of the Union and the sovereignty of its constituent "states," was designed to appeal to both Kazakhs and non-Kazakhs.

The same carefully inclusive approach moved Kazakhstan's authorities to seek the approval of public organizations in the republic before proclaiming any intentions of altering the all-Union question. In early March, at the initiative of Nazarbaev, Asanbaev held an unprecedented (and televised) meeting with representatives of Kazakhstan's parties and groups, at which he solicited their support for the planned change. The suggested wording was first published only on March 6. A few days later, the Supreme Soviet and most of the organizations that had participated in the meeting issued a public appeal: "Not wanting the dissolution of our country [and] guided by our sovereignty declaration," they urged voters to answer "Yes" to Kazakhstan's question, which would address the "essence and main aim of the all-Union referendum--the preservation of our common home and will be an important step on the road to signing a Union Treaty."[51]

There are indications that these tactics were effective: judging by letters published in the republic press, different groups and nationalities in Kazakhstan saw in the wording

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[49] *Izvestiya*, March 8, 1991.

[50] FBIS DR Regional Affairs, April 18, 1991, p. 56.

[51] *Soviety Kazakhstana*, March 15, 1991.

whatever they wanted to see and urged everyone to approve it.[52] For example, CPSU members and veterans organizations proclaimed their dedication to the "socialist choice" and appealed for a "Yes" vote.

A quite different rationale for voting affirmatively appeared in *Gorizont*, a student weekly. Its March 16 editorial defense of the republic's wording observed that the center would see a "Yes" vote on the all-Union question as confirmation of the "socialist choice," which not everyone supported. *Gorizont* criticised the imprecision of the all-Union wording, complained about the unclear relationship between the referendum and the draft Union Treaty, and argued that republics that are sovereign states, as their sovereignty declarations assert, could more logically unite in a confederation than a federation. The editorialist concluded that the all-Union wording was a "conscious effort to maintain at any cost the status quo of the current state structure and in the final analysis, preserve the functions of the center and the scope of its power." Voters were reminded that preservation of the Union is "not a personal cause of Gorbachev, concerned to strengthen his power, but our own vital cause."

Not all cities or regions in Kazakhstan, however, were pleased with the formulation. Some counties and the city council of Ust-Kamenogorsk argued that Kazakhstan's Supreme Soviet was not empowered to modify the all-Union question. Asanbaev acknowledged to *Pravda* that similar sentiments and concerns evidently animated people in Tselinograd and "other cities of the republic" who wrote letters charging that the leadership intended to infringe upon their rights. Asanbaev did not identify the complainants, but they were probably Russians who felt nervous about voting for Kazakhstan as a "sovereign state."

The Voting

Balloting took place from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. Voters not in their place of permanent residence could show a certificate and be added to supplemental lists. According to the rules, representatives of work collectives and social organizations could observe the procedures.

Members of electoral commissions, people's deputies and agitators at work places and residences got out the vote. Agitators went from door to door, trying to deliver in person the invitations to vote. The March 16 *Vechernyaya Alma-Ata* reported on a polling place where there would be a buffet, a book sale, and artists would perform. Voters who came early would get souvenirs and flowers, as would veterans and youth.

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[52] Apparently, not only in Kazakhstan: one western correspondent described Kazakhstan as "the only republic in the country which looks like having a reasonably straightforward question." Quentin Peel, "Confused Voters will Face More than One Loaded Question," *Financial Times*, March 15, 1991.

On March 17, Commission staffers visited polling places in the Frunze region of Alma-Ata. They observed that ballot boxes were unsealed, so anyone could have deposited inside them large numbers of ballots. The presence of observers would have made such possible chicanery more difficult but in Alma-Ata (and presumably elsewhere in Kazakhstan), there appeared to be weakly developed mechanisms to assure a fair vote and count. Election commissions were not composed of members of different political parties and organizations who could keep a watchful eye on each other. Local political activists ruefully told Commission staff that political life was insufficiently developed in Kazakhstan for such institutionalized safeguards of fair voting practices.[53]

In the absence of such mechanisms, it is difficult to vouch for the accuracy of the results. Local political activists informed Helsinki Commission staff of a case of ballot stuffing, which was observed and reported on by members of an election commission, who were subsequently called "traitors" at their workplaces for raising a fuss.

Results

According to official sources, 88.2 percent of the almost 10 million eligible voters took part, of whom 94.1 percent voted "Yes." 5 percent voted "No," and 0.9 percent of ballots were invalid.[54]

While the officially announced high turnout and even higher "Yes" vote might sound suspiciously like a "stagnation-era" figure, there is reason to believe that the figures indicate more than an old-fashioned rigged election. The question was designed to elicit the widest possible range of supporters. And while nationality relations are tense in the republic, local opposition spokesmen reported that Nursultan Nazarbaev is widely respected among most of the multi-national population of Kazakhstan. In fact, he has developed a reputation well beyond the republic's borders, having been touted as a candidate for the vice-presidency of the USSR and having traveled to the United States. As he said on election day, voters answering "Yes" to a question that addressed the essence of the all-Union referendum while reflecting Kazakhstan's declaration of sovereignty "at the same time will express their trust in us, the leaders of the republic."[55]

Nevertheless, *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* on March 19 provided some details--not nearly enough, unfortunately--of resistance to the referendum. For example, residents of the Pri-Ural region did not vote, apparently at the behest of local people's deputies who

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[53] Republic president Nazarbaev put it differently to *Komsomolskaya Pravda* on April 13: "To this day, the Party's positions are very strong here."

[54] *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, March 19, 1991.

[55] *Ibid.*

had appealed for a boycott. These boycotters may have been Russian cossacks who have been calling for the secession of their region from Kazakhstan.

On the other hand, the newspaper reported that the voting was successful in Ust-Kamenogorsk, where sharp debates about which wording to use had initially led the city council to back the all-Union question. Eventually, however, local authorities reconsidered this position in the interests of "social harmony in the city," and called upon people to vote "Yes," even though the wording of the republic referendum was "unacceptable." In Tselinograd, where concerns about the republic's question had also been expressed, about 95 percent of those who voted said "Yes."

In sum, the referendum in Kazakhstan did little to bolster Mikhail Gorbachev or his vision of the Union. His attempts to pressure the republic leadership to stick to his wording failed, and the meaning of the question presented to Kazakhstan's voters--like the all-Union question--was in the eye of the beholder. In this sense, it might be argued that Mikhail Gorbachev's all-Union referendum did not take place in Kazakhstan. If necessary, Nazarbaev, who managed to emerge strengthened from a referendum he did not want, could argue this point to Gorbachev (or, should the need arise, to Yeltsin as well). On the other hand, the referendum did bring to the surface national tensions in the republic, which wordsmithing alone will not alleviate, much less eliminate.

III. THE VOTING ELSEWHERE

Helsinki Commission staff did not observe the balloting in the following republics. The data below come from published accounts, which provided more information about some republics than others. In all cases, the results given reflect official Soviet claims, followed by unofficial reports and figures, when available.

Armenia

Armenian legislators decided on January 31 to boycott the referendum, claiming that it violated the right of nations to self-determination. They maintained this position despite the importunities of USSR Supreme Soviet chairman Anatoly Lukyanov, to whose telegrams they responded that "you try to save the system which hurt Armenia and Armenians in the past."[56]

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[56] The text of the Armenian reply to Lukyanov was supplied to Helsinki Commission staff by the Armenian Assembly.

Results

Pravda claimed on March 18 that "many" in Armenia nevertheless voted at polling places established by military units. According to information from Armenian sources, Russian construction workers in Armenia's earthquake zone cast ballots.[57]

The Armenian parliament, rather than organize a counter-referendum on independence *a la* the Baltic States and Georgia, has chosen a novel way to leave the USSR: compliance with Soviet law. As provided for in the April 1990 law on secession, Armenia on September 21 will hold a referendum, in which voters will answer the question "Are you in favor of an independent and democratic Armenia outside the USSR?" If the referendum takes place as planned, it would be the first time that a Soviet republic has made what the Kremlin considers a legal effort to secede.

Azerbaijan

Opinions on the referendum were sharply divided in the Azerbaijani Supreme Soviet. The Democratic Bloc, which opposes Azerbaijan's signing the Union Treaty, counseled against participating, citing the center's inability to address the Nagorno-Karabakh (NKAO) conflict satisfactorily. Proponents of the referendum, including republic president and Azerbaijani Communist Party leader Ayaz Mutalibov, pointed to the economic effects of weakened links among republics as a convincing reason to hold the vote. They argued that failure to participate could let Moscow play the NKAO card against Azerbaijan, either by introducing presidential rule in the oblast or by restoring local organs of power that might then declare NKAO an independent subject of the Union Treaty.[58]

Nevertheless, on March 7, Azerbaijan's Supreme Soviet voted to hold the referendum. According to a report in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, Mutalibov managed to sway the deputies by promising that the republic would under no circumstances sign the Union Treaty unless certain conditions were met. The Democratic Bloc faction reacted bitterly to the decision to hold the referendum; ten of its members began a hunger strike in protest.

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[57] Armenian sources, citing information from Armenian President Ter-Petrosyan, also report that no Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh took part in the March 17 referendum.

[58] *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, March 9, 1991. An interesting sidelight of the debate in the Azerbaijani Supreme Soviet concerns the republic's former leader and CPSU Politburo member, Geidar Aliev. He has returned to public life after his 1989 "retirement" by winning a seat in the September 1990 Azerbaijani parliamentary elections. In arguing against the referendum and the Union Treaty--he urged the retirement of republic leaders with opposing views--Aliev joined forces with the Democratic Bloc. Politics make strange bedfellows indeed.

The decision to hold the referendum may help explain the noteworthy appeal by Gorbachev on March 14 to Armenians and Azerbaijanis. In calling upon both peoples to begin a process of reconciliation, he stated that Nagorno-Karabakh is and will remain "an inalienable part of Azerbaijan. Thus has history ruled."

One peculiar aspect of the referendum in Azerbaijan are persistent reports about a second question having been adopted by the Azerbaijani Supreme Soviet. The Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry replied to Helsinki Commission inquiries that the legislature "did not adopt any second question in addition to the all-Union referendum. Moreover such question was not discussed." But Radio Liberty sources, basing themselves on contacts in Azerbaijan, maintain that there was, in fact, a second question put to voters in Azerbaijan. As of late April, it has not been possible to confirm either contention.

Results

According to TASS, turnout was 74.9 percent and 92 percent voted "Yes." But *Russkaya Mysl* of March 22 cites claims by Azerbaijani Popular Front (APF) representatives of low public involvement and only 20-25 percent turnout, as well as many irregularities. They charged further that APF observers were kicked out of polling places or detained by the authorities.

Belorussia

Belorussia's conservative-dominated Supreme Soviet held the referendum exactly as Mikhail Gorbachev wanted. The most influential opposition group in the republic, the Belorussian Popular Front, urged voters to go to the polls and vote "No."

Results

TASS reported that 83 percent of eligible voters cast ballots and about the same percentage voted affirmatively. Unofficial sources reported irregularities: Popular Front leader Zyanon Paznyak told RFE/RL on March 19 that a Popular Front poll watcher was beaten up and kicked out of a polling place in Minsk. RFE/RL also reported accounts by a free-lance journalist in Minsk about a variety of irregularities.

Estonia

Like Lithuania and Latvia, the Estonian authorities ignored the referendum, so central bureaucracies provided assistance in organizing the voting. About 80 polling places opened in Tallinn, guarded by "workers militias," and in northeastern cities (Kotla-Jarva, Narva and Sillamae). Polling places also operated in other cities where Russian-speakers

were concentrated, such as Tartu, Valga and Pernu. There were reports that people from Leningrad oblast were bused to Narva to vote.[59]

Results

Some 250,000 people voted for the Union in Estonia, according to official sources. There were many reports of fraud; several journalists said they had voted many times.

On March 12, the Estonian Supreme Council announced that the results of the referendum do not commit the parliament or government of the Estonian Republic to participate in talks on the Union Treaty or to join the Union Treaty in any form.[60]

Georgia

Georgia's parliament decided on January 30 to boycott the referendum. On March 5, the parliament's chairman, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, repeated the boycott call in a television broadcast to the non-Georgian population, warning that only those who vote for Georgian independence would get Georgian citizenship and land.[61]

Results

Nevertheless, TASS reported that about 50,000 people voted in south Ossetia, with a south Ossetian spokesman claiming that only 9 people had voted "No."[62] Voting also took place in Abkhazia, where apparently the entire non-Georgian population voted.[63] According to *Pravda*, 245 polling places opened in the Abkhazian capital of Sukhumi. In Abkhazia as a whole, 52.4 percent took part and 98.4 percent voted "Yes."

The Georgian parliament annulled on April 7 the results of the March 17 referendum and noted "blatant violations" of voting procedures. A Swiss observer in Abkhazia confirmed that irregularities had taken place.[64]

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[59] *Russkaya Mysl*, March 22, 1991.

[60] FBIS DR March 12, 1991, p. 70.

[61] See below, p. 40.

[62] *Izvestiya*, March 19, 1991.

[63] RFE/RL DR March 18, 1991.

[64] FBIS DR Supplement, Regional Affairs, April 2, 1991, p. 47.

Kyrgyzstan (Kirgizia)

The opposition movement *Kyrgyzstan* on February 23 came out against participation in the referendum, but the republic's authorities gave every sign of complying fully with the rules of the all-Union referendum. In fact, so late did they decide to add a question (March 10) that most printed accounts listed Kyrgystan as one of four republics to hold the referendum as Gorbachev wished. Apparently, republic leaders eventually chose to take account of opposition movements and offer them a compromise.

The supplementary question was: "Do you agree that the Republic of Kyrgyzstan should be in the renewed Union as a sovereign republic (state) with equal rights?"

Results

According to TASS, turnout was almost 93 percent and over 94 percent of participants voted "Yes" on the all-Union question. Information on the reponse to the second question has not been available.

Lithuania

Lithuanian authorities refused to hold the all-Union referendum, so balloting took place on the basis of the February 25 USSR Supreme Soviet resolution empowering local soviets, enterprises and military units to organize voting, which began on March 14. The central Soviet media bemoaned the plight of those wishing to take part, charging that President Landsbergis had threatened them with criminal prosecution.[65] A March 15 *Pravda* article titled "In Conditions of Moral Terror" reported that Lithuanians were barring entry to polling places, that ruffians were prepared to disrupt the voting and that would-be voters had been warned they would lose their jobs. A group of USSR Supreme Soviet deputies traveled to Lithuania to observe the proceedings. Post-referendum reports in the Soviet media stressed that far more people would have voted had they not feared to do so.

Russkaya Mysl reported that the soviets of Vilnius and Salcininkai counties (where many Poles live) decided to hold the referendum. Lithuania's Supreme Council annulled their decision on March 12, but Moscow delivered about 2.5 million ballots to Vilnius on the same day.

Results

According to TASS, 652,000 people participated, of whom 96.7 percent voted "Yes." Lithuanian Communist Party sources reported that about 100,000 people had voted at military bases.

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[65] *Pravda*, March 19, 1991.

Moldova

On February 19, the Moldovan parliament decided not to hold the all-Union referendum. Local governing councils in the Gagauz-populated southern regions and on the left bank of the Dniester river--populated largely by non-Moldavans--thereupon passed opposing resolutions; the cities of Bendery, Beltsy and Tiraspol', Moldavia's second largest city (with a mostly Russian population) held the referendum.

If many people came to vote, however, indications are that many of them may have voted many times. It was widely reported that there were no voter lists in polling places opened in all-Union enterprises and military units, voters' documents were not checked and no one monitored the activity of the electoral commissions. A commander of the Soviet military base in Kishinev acknowledged that voters were not checked against a central list and their identification papers were not marked after they voted. "I intend to declare that the results will be inaccurate," he told a western correspondent.[66]

In Moldovan areas of the republic, including the capital, Kishinev, central authorities aided local pro-Union organizations that attempted to organize voting at 50 polling places that opened on March 14. These efforts did not go smoothly. *Pravda* charged on March 19 that Moldovan nationalists blocked the roads to nine polling places in military units and beat up World War II veterans trying to vote for the Union. Western reports corroborated accounts of clashes between would-be voters and local activists, aided or abetted by Moldovan policemen, who blockaded the polling places.[67] Nevertheless, Moldovan leaders at a March 19 press conference rejected charges about the prevalence of physical intimidation against would-be voters and asserted that those few instances that had occurred were under investigation.

Results

Official Soviet sources say over 800,000 people voted, of whom, presumably, the great majority voted affirmatively. Moldova's President Snegur pointed out that even if the figure was accurate, it amounted to only 28 percent of the republic's registered voters.

Tajikistan

Calls by leaders of the Democratic Party and *Rastokhez*, the Popular Front organization, for a boycott of the referendum were unavailing. Republic authorities held the referendum Mikhail Gorbachev wanted.

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[66] Dan Petreanu (AP), "Moldavians Block Many Polling Spots," *Washington Times*, March 18, 1991.

[67] See *Russkaya Mysl*, March 22, 1991.

Results

TASS reported that 94 percent of eligible voters took part and that 96 percent of them voted "Yes." Opposition groups claimed that voters were bribed on March 17 with hard-to-get goods at polling places, like shoes. A western correspondent in Tajikistan reported, however, that such inducements--or vote-rigging--were not really necessary. Most people, including the opposition groups, envision Tajikistan's future within the Union, which, a Democratic Party leader hoped, would become "an EC-style federation."[68]

Turkmenistan

Saparmurad Niyazov, president of Turkmenistan, said he initially opposed a referendum, considering the possible effect on voting results of widespread discontent caused by food shortages and the general economic decline. *Agzybirlik*, the popular front group, called for a boycott. Nevertheless, Turkmenistan did hold the referendum along all-Union lines.

Results

Turnout was 97.7 percent, according to TASS, and about the same percentage of voters cast affirmative ballots.

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan's president Islam Karimov said on Soviet television March 9 that he had opposed a Union-wide referendum in Uzbekistan, since it was clear that the absolute majority of people wanted the republic to remain part of the Union. Furthermore, he felt, the wording was equivocal, and contained more than one question.[69] Uzbekistan's Popular Front group, *Birlik*, agreed: according to a February 18 RFE/RL report, the group called for a boycott of the referendum, citing the question's imprecision and doubts that the human rights guaranteed in it would be honored.

On February 21, Uzbekistan's Supreme Soviet decided to add another question, worded as follows: "Do you agree that Uzbekistan should remain part of a renewed Union (federation) as a sovereign republic with equal rights?"

Results

Pravda Vostoka reported on March 21 that 93.7 percent of those who voted answered the all-Union question affirmatively. But according to *Birlik* spokesmen, turnout did not exceed 40 percent and most participants were Russian-speakers employed in

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[68] Jo Carley, "Shoppers Vote with their Feet in Remote Tajikistan," *Financial Times*, March 18, 1991.

[69] FBIS DR March 11, 1991, pp. 84-85.

enterprises subordinated to all-Union ministries. *Birlik* observers alleged numerous irregularities, from selling deficit goods at polling places to handing out many ballots to voters.[70]

As for Uzbekistan's second question, according to *Pravda Vostoka*, 93.9 percent of voters said "Yes."

IV. OFFICIAL UNION-WIDE RESULTS OF THE MARCH 17 VOTING

Vladimir Orlov, Chairman of the USSR Central Referendum Commission, on March 25 announced that 185,647,355 citizens had been entitled to vote. 148,574,606 did so, a total of 80 percent. Of these, 113,519,812 people, or 76.4 percent, answered "Yes." 32,303,977 people, or 21.7 percent, voted "No." 2,757,817 ballots, (1.9 percent), were declared invalid.[71] Orlov, like most other Soviet officials, had little or nothing to say about the results of ballotting on any question other than the all-Union formulation.

Gorbachev's referendum fared poorly in the USSR's biggest cities: only 50.02 percent of those who voted in Moscow said "Yes"; the corresponding figure in Leningrad was 50 percent. Kiev, Sverdlovsk and Sverdlovsk oblast (Boris Yeltsin's home region) registered affirmative results under 50 percent.

Interestingly, the final figures coincided to a remarkable degree with the results of a poll conducted, apparently in early February, by the CPSU Central Committee's Nationalities Policy Department. That survey predicted about 80 percent participation, countrywide, and that three-quarters of the participants would answer in the affirmative.[72]

V. "COUNTER-REFERENDUM II" -- GEORGIA

Background

On January 30, the Georgian parliament decided not to hold the all-Union referendum and organized its own independence plebiscite, scheduled to coincide with municipal elections on March 31, 1991. The question put to voters read: "Do you agree that the state independence of Georgia should be restored on the basis of the independence act of May 26, 1918?" The Soviet government responded to Georgia's referendum as it had reacted to the plebiscites in the Baltic States, labeling it an opinion poll with no standing in law.

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[70] *Russkaya Mysl*, March 22, 1991.

[71] FBIS DR March 26, 1991, p. 33.

[72] FBIS DR February 7, 1991, p. 26.

But while there are parallels between the situation in Georgia and the Baltic States, the differences are even greater. In both cases, there are problems arising from ethnic diversity and diverging views on how best to achieve political independence, but the political context in which Georgia's referendum took place was much more conflict-ridden and violent.

Georgia's domestic politics revolve around the longstanding confrontation between the ruling coalition "Round Table" headed by Zviad Gamsakhurdia and the National Congress, whose best known leader, Gia Chanturia, is Gamsakhurdia's arch-rival. Attempts to reconcile the two groups have failed, primarily because of the deep mutual hostility between the two leaders,[73] and the clash between their heavily armed supporters has been bloody. Georgia's parliament has subsumed its own paramilitary groups into the Republic Militia, but has declared all other armed units illegal and has arrested the leadership of the major group, "Mkhedrioni," which supports the National Congress.

Far bloodier, however, has been the conflict between Georgia's authorities and South Ossetia, which wants to remain part of the Union and would, ideally, like to unite with North Ossetia, located across the Georgia-RSFSR border. Since December 1990, when the Georgian authorities abolished South Ossetia's autonomy, a shooting war has been in progress. Further complicating the situation is the involvement of Soviet military and Internal Affairs troops, which, Georgian officials claim, are supplying the Ossetians with arms, including surface-to-surface missiles.

After the nationalists' victory in the October 1990 Georgian parliamentary elections, the new Georgian legislature declared a transition period to independence. Georgian leaders have described the conflict with south Ossetia to be largely a product of Kremlin provocations to prevent Georgia from gaining its freedom.[74] As the conflict has intensified, so has the government's tendency to view opposition movements inside Georgia as treason and outside criticism of its policies in Ossetia as witting or unwitting complicity in anti-Georgian conspiracies. Consequently, Georgia's March 31 referendum took place in a troubled atmosphere.

The Voting

TASS reported on March 23 that voting had begun in the Georgian referendum for those who would not be able to vote on March 31. The mechanics of voting in the

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[73] Both have accused each other of being KGB agents. In a March 5 television address, Gamsakhurdia said "this is not an opposition but Moscow's agents in Georgia. I state this with full responsibility." Later on in his speech, Gamsakhurdia said that "members of the so-called opposition...we profoundly believe...will quite soon be called to account before Georgia and the Georgian people." FBIS DR Supplement, Regional Affairs, April 2, 1991, p. 33.

[74] Ibid.

referendum were organized much as they had been for Georgia's October 1990 parliamentary elections, and great care was taken to ensure that the balloting was properly administered. The Central Election Commission was composed of representatives of the 40 parties participating in the municipal elections; the same diversity characterized the local electoral commissions, which actually oversaw activities at the polling places. Polls were open from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. Election officials worked out elaborate procedures to allow voters outside their residential districts on election day to vote elsewhere or to vote early and to remove their names from local rolls to protect against double voting. Ballots were prepared in eight languages, and, when observers checked at the polls, there were, indeed, ballots available in the needed language(s) for that locality. Very detailed voting lists had been prepared as well, and these were scrupulously checked during the actual balloting. In sum, the Georgian electoral officials did everything possible to observe all the formalities of a well run, secret ballot.

Observers

The Georgian government, through the Central Electoral Commission, invited over 40 independent international observers to monitor the voting process throughout the republic. The observers represented nine foreign countries and eight other republics, formally still a part of the Soviet Union. Election officials made every effort to enable observers to travel anywhere they wished, so that voting throughout the whole of Georgia could be observed. In fact, there were observers in virtually every important region except for the city of Tskhinvali--the capital of South Ossetia--where fighting was going on and the city commandant refused access to outsiders.

Observers traveled from polling place to polling place on election day, and most stayed for the opening of the ballot box and the counting in at least one location. On the following afternoon, when those who had travelled to the more remote areas of Georgia had returned to Tbilisi, the observers met and discussed what they had seen. There was virtual unanimity of opinion that the election had been run very properly, with scrupulous adherence to international norms, and that the Central Electoral Commission and local commissions had done a truly laudable job of conducting the balloting and tallying.

Results

On the evening of April 1, officials announced preliminary results of the voting on the independence referendum (results of the municipal elections would take much longer to compile). Not surprisingly, the outcome was overwhelmingly pro-independence. The actual figures, however, were surprisingly high: of nearly 3.5 million eligible voters, turnout was over 90 percent. Of those who voted, 99 percent had voted for independence.

As for Georgia's hot spots, in South Ossetia, the referendum was boycotted in the districts of Tskhinvali, Dzhava and Kornis. Turnout on March 31 in Abkhazia was reportedly 60 percent, with 97 percent of voters backing independence: the figures, as an

RFE/RL analyst pointed out, are hard to square with the March 17 results, when 52.4 percent took part and 98.4 percent voted to preserve the Union.[75]

Conclusions

If the mechanics of the vote were irreproachable, observers nonetheless felt uncomfortable about the context of the Georgian referendum. They wondered whether the atmosphere surrounding the exercise contributed to the (abnormally) high turnout and the (equally abnormally) high positive result. No one doubted that practically all Georgians and many non-Georgian residents of the republic want independence from the Soviet Union. But many felt that the government, largely in the person of the Chairman of the Parliament Zviad Gamsakhurdia, had created an extremely threatening atmosphere by warning what would happen to those, especially non-Georgians, who either did not participate or did not support independence.

Speaking on Georgian television on March 5, Gamsakhurdia said:

> our referendum is directly connected with questions of ownership of the land and citizenship....the referendum is essential...not only for Georgians but also people of different nationalities...People who embarked together with us on the path of Georgia's independence will acquire citizenship, given, of course, compliance with elementary conditions which we will set them. So let no one prior to the referendum think of possessing Georgian land without citizenship status.[76]

Under the circumstances, it seems reasonable to conclude that many non-Georgians who participated and voted affirmatively did so under constraint.

After the referendum, Georgia's parliament declared the republic's independence from the Soviet Union. On April 15, deputies created the position of President of Georgia and elected Zviad Gamsakhurdia to fill that post until popular elections are held on May 26, 1991. His election--a virtual certainty--would enhance his mandate to pursue full independence for Georgia. How it will affect the status of Gamsakhurdia's political opponents and non-Georgians in the republic, as the law on citizenship emerges from the legislature, is unclear.

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[75] Elizabeth Fuller, "How Wholehearted is Support in Georgia for Independence?" *Report on the USSR*, Volume 3, Number 15, April 12, 1991, p. 20.

[76] FBIS DR Supplement, Regional Affairs, April 2, 1991, p. 34.

VI. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MARCH 17 REFERENDUM

General Remarks

Considering how much time, effort, money, hoopla, vitriol and panic-mongering went into the first referendum in Soviet history, its actual significance appears small. As various analysts had predicted, it resolved no problems and produced no clear answers to any questions.[77] In fact, it would even be difficult to argue that the referendum and its outcome have appreciably heightened tensions in the USSR. The most remarkable thing about the exercise, one month after its completion, is how little attention it now receives. The first referendum in Soviet history produced plebiscitory paralysis, and the standoff between the center and the republics continues.

Victory for the Union?

Central Soviet media naturally portrayed the outcome as a solid victory for the Union. But if 80 percent of eligible voters turned out, and 76 percent of them said "Yes," then, as Anatoly Lukyanov told Soviet television viewers on March 21, [only] 58.3 percent of eligible voters in the Soviet Union had voted for the Union--a disappointing figure, even conceding the accuracy and fairness of the vote. Lukyanov put the best face on the outcome, describing it as "especially important considering that the voting had taken place during such an unstable time."[78] But pessimists would see the glass as half empty: it would be just as natural to focus on how many Soviet citizens stayed home or voted against whatever they thought Mikhail Gorbachev was asking them to back.

Gorbachev's Position

Gorbachev himself badly needed a victory in the referendum, given the disastrous domestic situation and his need to shore up foreign support. Aware of his plummeting popularity, Soviet officials before March 17 consistently tried to distinguish between Gorbachev the politician and the Union he was trying to save. For instance, Anatoly Lukyanov assailed attempts to substitute for the subject of the referendum "the subject of confidence in...the president....And I can only describe this as an unscrupulous political and propaganda trick pursuing quite specific goals."[79]

Nevertheless, Lukyanov on March 21 said on Soviet television "it is not only the idea of preserving the Union that has been supported...the line that was pursued by the country's leadership has also been supported" and he specified the USSR Congress of

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[77] See, for example, Ann Sheehy, "Referendum on Preservation of the Union," *Report on the USSR*, Volume 3, Number 7, February 15, 1991, p. 5.

[78] FBIS DR March 22, 1991, p. 23. Given the underwhelming numerical show of support, Lukyanov's subsequent expression of gratitude to "each and every Soviet citizen" who voted "Yes" sounds truly heartfelt.

[79] FBIS DR March 19, 1991, p. 28.

People's Deputies, the Supreme Soviet and President Gorbachev.[80] This effort to link Gorbachev personally with a putatively successful referendum, while perhaps not surprising, is unlikely to produce any tangible or even atmospheric gains for the Soviet president. Considering that he was hoping to gain a public mandate for the kind of Union he envisions and a weapon against republic legislatures, he came away with little. In fact, Gorbachev's stature could hardly have risen by virtue of his association with the referendum initiative--another failed policy.

More important, the impending election of a president of the RSFSR, which will almost certainly generate pressure for presidential elections in other republics, will weaken Gorbachev's position further. Republic presidents, as opposed to chairmen of legislatures, which is what most "presidents" of Soviet republics are today, will probably feel emboldened to pursue republic priorities with greater vigor. At the same time, the difference between elected republic presidents--especially if they win a popular vote, rather than a majority of ballots in their legislatures--will highlight even more Mikhail Gorbachev's reluctance to put his candidacy before the public. A victory by Yeltsin in a popular election as RSFSR president would allow him to question openly Gorbachev's legitimacy. And other heads of republics that added a question on March 17 can also emphasize in their negotiations with the center the strong support among their constituents for real sovereignty.

Prospects for Consolidation?

Gorbachev on March 15 promised voters that "A positive outcome of the referendum would lay the basis for the consolidation of society." If anything, however, the referendum did just the opposite. It laid bare the conflicts between center and republics, between republics and their constituent parts, between different nationalities inhabiting those regions and between political movements already inclined to view their differences in Manichean terms.

If nothing else, the experience of the referendum probably has discredited this tool of gauging public opinion, at least on the all-Union level. It is difficult to imagine that the all-Union referendum on private property approved in December 1990 by the Congress of People's Deputies will take place.

On the tactical plane, the referendum showed that a policy by the Soviet leadership of manipulation, as opposed to working out differences with the republics, is fruitless. It seems incontrovertible in the referendum's aftermath that there is no tactic the center can devise that republics will not exploit for their own purposes. Without a single source of consensually recognized authority, each party to the conflict can pass laws, withhold money

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[80] FBIS DR March 22, 1991, p. 24. Yet he immediately went on to characterize the motives of "forces that wanted to link the results to one personality or another, to one policy or another" as "not entirely altruistic."

from the other, organize appeals to public opinion, and trumpet its justification to do so. Yet if legislation is ignored, manipulation and cooptation fail, negotiation is half-hearted and concessions are not forthcoming, what remains but coercion? In this sphere, the center, at least on paper, has the advantage; is it willing to use it?

Mandate for Force?

The CPSU and the USSR Supreme Soviet used the referendum's outcome to call for discipline. As the Politburo put it, the vote supplied a mandate to "act resolutely and consistently," and "by lawful means to strengthen order, tighten discipline...and stabilize the situation."[81] Many Supreme Soviet deputies agreed; one called on Gorbachev to take resolute action or resign.[82] The Supreme Soviet's resolution on March 21 instructed state organs of the USSR and republics to be "guided by the people's decision" for a renewed USSR and urged the quickest possible completion of the Union Treaty while accelerating work on a new USSR constitution. In a show of bravado, the Soviet parliament told the USSR Constitutional Oversight Committee to rule on the actions of republics that refused to hold the referendum and ordered the procurator general to investigate violations of citizens' constitutional rights that had occurred.[83]

Despite these ominous rumblings, the Baltic Council on April 13 declared that since the Baltic States are not part of the USSR, the referendum "has no legal effect on the Baltic States and can in no way justify the use of pressure or force against Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania by the USSR authorities." Armenia, Georgia and Moldova also show no willingness to take either the referendum or the Union Treaty into account.

As of late April, although there are indications that intensified economic pressure against the uncooperative republics may be forthcoming, in the form of exclusion from favorable trade agreements, the center has made no serious effort to impose "discipline and order" on the republics. And it is hardly conceivable that the USSR Procurator General will bring up on charges leaders of republics that refused to hold the referendum, as the law provides.[84] If the center opts to use force against the republics, the March 17 referendum, its results, or violations of its prescribed procedures will not be the deciding factor, or probably even the justification.

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[81] FBIS DR April 1, 1991, p. 43.

[82] FBIS DR March 26, 1991, pp. 29-30.

[83] FBIS DR March 22, 1991, pp. 19-20.

[84] Soviet government spokesmen have singled out Moldova's leaders for particularly flagrant violations of the referendum law. Theoretically, anyone found guilty of trying to prevent the referendum from taking place could be sentenced to five years in jail.

The Referendum and the Union Treaty

Referring in a post-referendum television interview to the publication of the new version of the Union Treaty, Gorbachev said that by allowing Soviet citizens to "see the shape of the future Union, then they, as it were, by voting for and positively supporting and speaking in favor of preserving the Union had already approved this draft Union Treaty." The republic Supreme Soviets now had the draft, which had basically been approved by the referendum, and he thought it could be signed by April or May. As for Boris Yeltsin, Gorbachev observed that "the people came out in favor" of preserving the Union as a federation. "The leaders of Russia should bow to this and should proceed from this, from this political reality..."[85]

But the future of the Union Treaty in its mid-March 1991 incarnation is very much in doubt. Equally dubious are Gorbachev's assertions that all parties have approved the basics of the document except for some points of disagreement over matters like representation by the RSFSR's autonomous republics and oblasts.

Even if this were the only outstanding issue, it is anything but minor. Sergey Shakhrai, the Chairman of the Legislation Committee of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet has singled out the provision allowing republics to sign the Treaty "directly or as part of other republics" as a poisoned apple. If approved, it would give any of the RSFSR's 16 autonomous republics the possibility of "unilaterally seceding. We are talking about more than 50 percent of the territory of the Russian Federation."[86] And even if matters never got that far, as the March 9 issue of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* foresaw, "Russia would be placed in danger of permanent blackmail of an autonomous formation gaining a 'higher' status," which both the formations themselves and the center would not fail to exploit.

This issue had caused numerous problems during the negotiations before publication of the draft, with TASS reporting on February 27 that Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan were insisting that if the RSFSR's autonomous formations remain part of the RSFSR that they should not be parties to the Treaty. The concern of the Central Asian republics, naturally, is being overwhelmed by many new republics with full voting rights.

This disagreement over substance soon spilled over into style, as an unseemly dispute erupted over whether Yeltsin and his first deputy, Ruslan Khasbulatov, had signed the draft. Yeltsin and Khasbulatov issued heated denials; Soviet officials, backed up by Vladimir Isakov and Ramazan Abdulatipov, chairmen of the two chambers of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet, asserted that Khasbulatov had signed, with Yeltsin's full approval. In any

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[85] FBIS DR March 28, 1991, pp. 13-15.

[86] FBIS DR Supplement, "17 March Referendums," March 20, 1991, p. 47.

case, Yeltsin has rejected the draft, which he said, was "thrust on us," adding "there is a great deal with which we do not agree."[87]

Nor is the RSFSR the only republic whose leaders have voiced dissatisfaction with the draft. Kazakhstan's Nazarbaev complained about "lip service [having] been paid to Kazakhstan's specific proposals."[88] Azerbaijan's Mutalibov griped to *Izvestiya* on March 6: "Surely it is not normal for a central department to suggest to us that we lease from it natural resources in the republic, as happened recently..." Leaders of Ukraine, who decided last year not to sign the Treaty before adopting a new republic constitution, want to cut back the center's prerogatives. Chairman of the parliament Leonid Kravchuk is willing to cede defense, space, nuclear power, major scientific-technical problems and some other spheres, with all other tasks left to republic jurisdiction.[89]

The Central Asian republics, whose leaders declare they back a quick ratification of the Treaty, have also voiced grievances and concerns. Uzbekistan's president Islam Karimov has said that the "renewed Union" for which people voted, has no place for the economic *dikat* of Moscow.[90] Kirgiz president Askar Akaev opposes giving the Union primacy over republics, and argued that granting supreme executive power to the USSR president violates his role as coordinator of policy among parts of the Union.[91] Even deputies in Turkmenistan, which approved the draft on March 25, have suggested "some additions that would give more right to citizens of the federation.[92]

As if Gorbachev did not have enough problems with "enemies on the left," i.e., those who see the draft Union Treaty as too restrictive, his "enemies on the right" also opposed his vision of the "renewed Union." TASS on April 10 reported that leaders of the hardline pro-Union *Soyuz* faction of the USSR Supreme Soviet met on April 8 with Gorbachev and criticized the latest draft for giving too much power to the republics.[93]

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[87] FBIS DR March 11, 1991, p. 69.

[88] FBIS DR Supplement, March 20, 1991, p. 72.

[89] FBIS DR March 13, 1991, p. 83.

[90] RFE/RL DR April 17, 1991.

[91] Ibid.

[92] RFE/RL DR March 26, 1991,

[93] RFE/RL DR April 11, 1991.

Prospects for the Union Treaty

During his trip to Japan in mid-April, Gorbachev indicated that he was leaning towards signing a Treaty with the nine republics that had expressed their willingness to do so, leaving out the Baltic States, Moldova, Armenia and Georgia. His April 24 "pact" with nine republics clarified the situation somewhat, but on the other hand, it was never seriously in question that those nine republics wished to remain in the Union. What *kind* of Union is another matter, and it is clear that tough bargaining lies ahead. The republics will continue to insist on their sovereignty, and disputes over where the line between "sovereignty" ends and "unconstitutional insubordination" begins will remain a matter of opinion, contention, and, possibly, litigation, if not coercion.

In other words, the basic features of the topography of Soviet politics after the referendum were the same as before. Last December, Kazakhstan's president Nazarbaev said "unfortunately, it is a system that does not want to yield one iota of authority." The center's efforts to preserve that authority began with legislation. That having failed, it turned to manipulation, which has now also failed. If the March 17 referendum and its outcome now promote a willingness on the part of the center to proceed to negotiation, it will have served a higher purpose than its initiators intended.

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